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ABSTRACT

This study explores the belief that if students of Spanish do not write a word correctly, they can not pronounce it correctly. Particular attention focuses on the interrelation between using accent marks in orthography and pronunciation. It is demonstrated that: (1) accent marks may not always be relevant for second-language (L2) speakers, indicating a difference in parameter setting between L2 and the target language, and (2) L2 learners may pronounce Spanish words according to the target language norm without correct use of the accent mark. The data were solicited from high school student Spanish compositions. As students turn in their compositions, the researcher asked them to pronounce those words that lacked either a written accent mark or contained one where it should not occur. In about 90% of the cases, students who did not write an accent mark according to the norm could pronounce the word with proper stress. Asking students to pronounce words they write may allow instructors to analyze the interlanguage writing system of students instead of relying on error analysis in the classroom. The use and presentation of accent marks in standard methodologies and current textbooks for beginning and intermediate students are compared to the results of the study. (VWL)

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WRITTEN ACCENT MARKS FOR L2 SPANISH LEARNERS

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Abstract: The Significance of Written Accent Marks for L2 Spanish Learners

One of the most unfounded assumptions made in the Spanish L2 classroom is that if students do not write the Spanish word according to the target language norm, they will not be able to pronounce the word 'correctly'. The use of accent marks falls into this general category of interlanguage spelling. This paper demonstrates that (1) accent marks might not always be relevant for L2 speakers, indicating a difference in parameter setting between L2 and the target language, and (2) L2 learners may pronounce Spanish words according to the target language norm without 'correct' use of the accent mark. The data were solicited from student compositions. Students were asked to write on various topics and themes, and they had a number of reference resources available to check their work. Students were also told that the compositions would be graded (cf. Chastain 1990), thereby motivating students as much as possible to write Spanish according to the norms presented in textbooks. As the students turned in their compositions, the researcher asked the students to pronounce those words which either lacked a written accent mark or contained one where it should not occur. The results were tabulated. In slightly over 90% of the cases, students who did not write an accent mark according to the norm could indeed pronounce the word with proper stress. Implications are that language students should be allowed to provide this sort of feedback in an area such as orthographic conventions. Asking students to pronounce words they write may thereby allow instructors to analyze the interlanguage writing system of the students instead of relying on error analysis in the classroom. Relevant pedagogical implications may be derived from this study. The use and presentation of accent marks in standard methodologies and current textbooks for beginning and intermediate students are compared to the results of this study.

Introduction

In the second language classroom, instructors often make assumptions about the nature and shape of target language (TL) grammar, and they base formal decisions about the language-learning agenda based on these assumptions. They also assume that such decisions will be relevant to the language learner. This article addresses one such case, that of written accent marks in the Spanish L2 classroom. The purposes of this article are to demonstrate that (1) accent marks might not always be relevant for all L2 speakers, indicating a difference between TL and L2 use of accent marks, and (2) L2 learners tested may pronounce Spanish words according to the TL norm without express use of the accent mark, supporting Lee's study (1989) of monolingual Spanish-speaking children. While it is important for teachers and students to have a norm to use a a general set of language-learning guidelines, implications from this study are that concentration on TL use of accents marks might not be expressly necessary for (or even relevant to) an operationally communicative classroom. Although written AMs are placed over vowels, the tilde, written exclusively over n to siginfy [ñ], was included. For the purposes of discussion, it is to be noted that 'L2 speaker', 'learner', and 'subject' refer to the same population, intermediate learners of Spanish at the high school level.

Background

Despite the advances that second-language pedagogy has made in the past few decades, there still exist certain areas of language learning that frustrate teachers and students alike.[1] One of the most unfounded

assumptions made in the classroom is that if students do not write the L2 word according to the TL norm, whether in spelling or in use of accent marks, they will not be able to pronounce that word correctly. As a result, teachers often use error correction for learners as a means of feedback, instead of non-judgmental interlanguage analysis (Celce-Murcia and Hawkins 1985; Wieczorek 1991b). Language instructors still often assume that reading and writing are related in the same way that listening and speaking are related. However, speaking and writing are equally related (productive skills) in the same way that listening and reading are related (receptive skills). This article draws on such an assumption.

Accent marks (AMs) have been in general use in Spanish at least since the middle of the sixteenth century (cf. Douglass 1988:928). AMs are used in one of four ways in Spanish: to distinguish between monosyllabic words that have otherwise the same spelling (e.g., dé (subj. of dar 'to give') vs. the preposition de 'of', to distinguish between grammatical function (e.g., ¿cuándo? 'when' (interrogative) vs. cuando (relative adverb; este (adjective) 'this' vs. éste (pronoun)), to reflect full value of contiguous vowels in what otherwise would be a diphthong (e.g., mío 'mine' vs. vio 'he saw'), or to demonstrate primary word stress if certain orthographic conditions would not be followed when reading. Thus, if a word ends in a vowel or the letters n or s, stress of the word without a written AM lies on the penultimate syllable. If a word ends in a consonant other than n or s, primary word stress lies on the last syllable. Words that do not fall into this pattern use a written AM to show that the stress

pattern is marked. It is the case in the languages commonly taught in the classroom that more words appear without diacritics than with them.

The normal stress pattern in Spanish is penultimate for nouns. However, stress can fall on any of the last three syllables. If a word does not follow the general rules, a written AM is used to reflect marked stress placement. For example, papel and papeles do not need written AMs because of their structural description. However, sillón is written with the AM because it violates the general pattern described above. Its plural, sillones does not need an AM since sillones follows the general pattern. In verbs, stress placement indicates tense. The present tense (both indicative and subjunctive) is characterized by penultimate stress (e.g., ponga [pónga] 'that you may put', and duermes [dwérmes] 'you sleep'), while stress of the past tenses lies on the first syllable after the stem (e.g., habló [habló] 'you spoke'; vinieras [binjéras] 'that you came'). Stress of the future tenses lies on the first syllable after the infinitive marker r (e.g., rezaré [resaré] 'I will pray', comeremos [komerémos] 'we will eat').

To the reader not familiar with a certain pronunciation, AMs may indeed indicate a difference in word stress. An example is found in (1).

(1) Stress types in Spanish

Example	**Meaning**	**Stress**
término	'terms of an agreement'	(antepenultimate)
termino	'I finish' (present ind.)	(penultimate)
terminó	'I finished' (preterit)[2]	(ultimate)

Contrary to common belief, the AM does not explicitly 'move' stress, since 'move' implies that the speaker consciously creates a shift in word stress (cf. Harris 1983). The AM, part of the arbitrary norm of writing, simply encodes the stress.[3] Therefore, 'accent' differs from stress in that the latter is clearly the domain of phonology while the former belongs to orthography (coincidentally, both are productive language forms).

There exists a group of words that written with an accent are part of one grammatical category and without an accent are part of another. For example, esta and está appeared in the same sentence, although the speaker in both syntax and pronunciation clearly indicated the verb, not the adjective/pronoun. The same situation obtained in two separate compositions for *estan.

Although second language acquisition studies and pedagogy have often looked to linguistic theory as a framework for their studies, AMs are referred to only minimally in Transformational Generative Grammar, Natural Generative Grammar, and Government and Binding (cf. Hooper 1976; Hooper and Terrell 1976; Harris 1983). Thus, one inference is that the orthographic systems lies in the domain of pedagogy and of marginal use to linguistic theory. However, the L2 use of AMs can be of great interst to the researcher and instructor. The use of AMs in words such as prohíbe, ahínca and búho (according to the nuevas normas) clearly point to the spoken word as the basis for AM placement, not specifically the written word. Bull (1965:123) supports this view, stating

> once spelling peculiarities are properly associated with writing, and divorced from speech, the number of irregular forms is significantly decreased.

Other textbook perspectives include the following:

(a) Note that it is necessary to add an accent on the verb in the following combinations: (1) present participles with one or two pronouns... (2) affirmative commands with one or two pronouns...; and (3) infinitives with two pronouns...This is done to preserve the original stress on the verb form. (Terrell et al. 1990:435).

(b) When another syllable is added to a two-syllable (or more) affirmative command, an accent is placed over the stressed variable (Kupferschmid and Dorwick 1990:203).

(c) -Er and -ir [past participles] whose stems end in a vowel must have written an accent on the past participle to preserve the [i] sound (Jarest and Robinson 1990:132).

While it is indisputable that writing and speech are related, perspectives such as those above assume that writing is the basis for pronunciation of some verb (and noun) forms. Such is not necessarily the case, since no evidence to date supports this notion. As for 'preserving' the original stress of the form, the AM does not predict what syllable receives major stress but rather reflects general orthographic rules. This point is very important for L2 processes, since learners do not always perceive the relationship between speech and writing. In addition, teachers of language often assume that reading and writing on the one hand and listening and speaking on the other are the related components of language learning; they do not always compartmentalize L2 into the receptive vs. productive language skills.

Procedure

The data were solicited from student compositions, collected from high school students in June, 1990, in their third year of Spanish study. Students were able to use all resources available to them -- textbooks, handbooks, verb charts, dictionaries, each other, the instructor, etc. Students were also told that the compositions would be graded (cf. Chastain 1990), thereby motivating students as much as possible to write Spanish according to TL norms. In addition, students were not informed of the purpose of the investigation. Twenty-three participants provided 347 non-TL forms. Twenty-four students were part of the original group, but the results of one student were discounted because she chose to type her copy of the compositions. The appearance of AMs was therefore uncertain, since their (mis)placement may have been part of proof-reading skills instead of actual usage.

The 1986 ACFTL Guidelines advise integration of all language skills, one of which is writing. It has been the observation of the researcher that since native speakers do not always write words with AMs, students may operate according to a similar principle in encoding language. Faerch and Kasper (1987) suggest that introspection is one way of examining second language forms did not adhere to target language norms to pronounce the words they had written (within the sentence in which the words appeared). Mispronunciations in other than stress patterns were ignored. All words and frequencies extracted from the compositions (relevant to the discussion) are found in Appendix I.

Discussion

As stated above, 347 forms were extracted from student data. They were selected on the basis of appearance of an AM where one should not be, or of non-occurrence where one should be. The forms are represented in Table I.

Table I

Interlanguage forms with AMs

Native-like forms with AMs	Non-native-like forms where AMs should **not** appear	Non-native-like forms where AMs should appear
328	56	291
Total native forms: 328	Total non-native forms: 347	

Cursory evidence provided here suggests that writing and speech may be indeed be divorced (Bull 1965:123), supported by Lee (1989). For two of the students involved in this study, one had no AMs at all, and another only contained one written AM (used in a non-native way) in his compositions. A third student did not write tildes (although she categorically pronounces [ñ]). Of all students' forms that dealt with AMs (N=775), 48.6% (N=328) were native-like in use, and 51.4% (N=347) were non-native-like. The 328 forms that were native-like in form were not specifically tested for pronunciation, since this study concentrated on those forms that were non-native in form in relation to how the words would be pronounced. Of those 347 forms that were tested

from AM use and pronunciation, 23 were not pronounced according to the norm (6.63%). Twenty-one of the 23 forms were pronounced with penultimate stress, regardless of the written symbol of stress placement. A discussion follows of those words that were not written but pronounced according to the norm.

Eleven forms were invented words, similar to native-like forms. At least *magnificent, *sweater and *composition were meant to be Spanish words; the student who wrote them reported that they were indeed Spanish. The pretend stores *besoeria and *mariscoseria (the latter pronounced with stress over the [e]) appeared. Other interlanguage words obtained were *atéletico for atlético, *ordens for órdenes, *melocontés for melocotones, and *pisquiatria for psiquiatra). The form *chemico was interesting, since the speaker pronounced [kémika], an interlanguage variant of [kímika]. Since we often assume that vowels are pronounced phonetically, in this instance for the speaker, the written o corresponded to [a]. The form *peiña, pronounced with [ñ], was meant for peine. Since there was no systematic use of either of the non-native forms, no general tendencies can be yet identified.

Spelling was of marginal relevance for speakers in forms such as *chemiqo, *characteristicos, *composicione, *despuese, and *espanol, since the students pronounced ch as [k], si as [š], e as Ø, and n as [ñ]. While the misspellings do not deal directly with the role of AMs, some degree of parallel structures obtains. In other words, studewnts do not always pronounce L2 words according to the TL system, whether in the use of accent marks or of

other orthographic conventions. For a more detailed discussion of orthography, see Wieczorek (1991d).

One special form, *licensía clearly contained two AMs. The student who wrote this form pronounced the word according to pronunciation norms (that is, with stress on the [e]), and not on either of the syllables that contained the AMs. Additionally, this was the only word in the speaker's sample that contained two AMs.

For the non-native forms that did not contain AMs where they are in the TL, all were pronounced with penultimate stress, with the exception of *autobus and *composicione, pronounced as in English (the latter example was pronounced with [e]). Some of the pronunciations were surprising, given their relative frequency in the L2 classroom: *preterito, *sabado, *telefono. Four other words, the imperfect forms *acampabamos, *banabamos, *sufriamos, and *tomabamos were equally pronounced with penultimate stress, not yielding to the paradigmatic stress patterns as in Spanish L1 (cf. Hooper and Terrell 1976). The remaining words were *carcel, *comisaria, *continue, *estomago, *semaforo, and *vacio.

Other words of frequent use in the TL (and in the classroom) did not occur according to the norm in this sample. The adverb *tambien was written 26 times without the accent, four times with an accent over the i (used consistently by one speaker, in addition to the words *televisíon and *graducíon). The adverb *despues was used seventeen times without the standard AM, although all of the speakers could pronounce the word correctly. The greeting/farewell *adios appeared seven times. One student, who provided two non-standard

forms, also wrote *adios according to the norm two additional times. Other words in the same composition by the same speaker that suggest either variable use or a proof-reading technique were *semaforo/semáforo, *vacio/vacía, and *sabado/sábado, *musica/músicos.[4]

One student was asked to explain the form calle. Although the form itself was written according to the norm, the sentence did not read well, since the position of calle, a noun, should have required a verb. The student reported that the word was [kaí], as in the expression me caí 'I fell'.

In summary, a general tendency of the writing system of the subjects described here was not to write the AM where it would be needed in standard speech. When asked to pronounce their non-native forms, students could pronounce such forms with a high degree of accuracy. Some words that students thought were Spanish were either invented or simply the English word. The forms obtained most frequently were *tambien and *despues; there was variable use of written AMs in writing but a high degree of cohesion with the TL norm in pronunciation for most words found in this study.

Implications

Several implications are suggested from this brief study on the role of pronunciation and AMs. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather representative, given the limited set of data. Some of these implications are:

1. The Advanced Placement guidelines for use, misuse and non-use of AMs clearly indicate that only correct forms are acceptable, in concert with teachers' perspective on error analysis (cf. Wieczorek 1991b).

2. The written language must be integrated with speaking or pronunciation, especially in cases where teacher judgment might not take into account the interlanguage system (i.e., the varying use of forms).

3. Teachers have to re-examine how students' learning of language fulfills communicative goals without strict attention to form in one of the skills. Since students in this study could pronounce the majority of words they write without benefit of written AMs, they apparently use the spoken word as the basis for communication. While attention to the marked condition in the TL is a laudable goal, it may not be appropriate for L2 learners, especially at the beginning levels. That is, if the form written with an AM is the 'marked' case, students and instructors may delay a focus on the AM as a later goal of language learning. It is undeniable that AMs are part of the written language, but we are forced to re-examine whether AMs are as important as current methodology claims. Furthermore, the use of AMs might complicate L2 intuitions inculcated in students by implying that the written word is the basis for Spanish as a communicative tool.

4. The use and non-use (in native and non-native ways) of AMs indicate an imperfectly learned markedness system, complicated by the fact that AMs are not used in English.[5] In addition, students in the typical high school or college classroom have been literate in L1 (in this case, in English) for more than 15 years, and it cannot be presumed that they have mastered all the intricacies of the L1 writing system, let alone have formal control over the TL system.

5. In a communicative classroom, teachers cannot assume that if students do not write a certain form according to the norm, they cannot subsequently

pronounce the word accurately. AMs need to be associated with the written form of the language, although pronunciation is an integral part of the appearance of an AM.

6. Use of AMs might belong to the domain of proof reading, lack of attention to detail, or any of a number of other factors not related to word knowledge. In written Spanish, it is not inconceivable that physical space in newspapers, on lined paper, etc. does not allow for AM use. This is certainly one option available for upper-case letters. Thus, language learners might not use written AMs because of lack of attention to detail, not because they do not know how a word is spoken.

7. Variable use of phonological stress influencing the written word and the written word influencing the spoken word may be included in the Interlanguage system. More research aimed at discovering the interplay must be gathered.

8. Other cases where introspection is warranted are of primary interest to the second language classroom. Inspection is especially important for verb (and other) forms where instructors assume that students will pronounce those words incorrectly.

9. In cases where error analysis takes precedence over other forms of feedback, instructors must take into account the function of language versus the strict attention to form (cf. Wieczorek 1991b). For example, if students produce este instead of éste, they may in fact be using Spanish in a communicative way although the AM appears or does not appear in the expected form.

10. Other languages taught in the classroom (e.g., other Romance, Germanic, and Slavic groups) contain AMs that equally may or may not be relevant for the learner. Implications from this pilot study on AMs warrants replication not only in Spanish but in other languages as well. It may be that there is a relationship between IL use and adherence to speech pattern norms as opposed to adherence to writing norms.

11. Additional phenomena of spelling may reflect more information about the relationship between writing and speech (cf. Wieczorek 1991d). Such areas could include use of spelling variants such as c <-->qu, c<-->z, g<-->j, etc.

12. Teachers and students must learn to analyze textbook statements on AMs so that any classroom or other L2 writing practice reflects rather than predicts orthographic conventions. To that end, statements concerning AMs should attempt to guide students toward the TL, not mandate the TL as a fait accompli.

13. The testing situation should reveal the relationship between productive and receptive language skills. In other words, since speaking and writing are related in that both are productive skills, students should be allowed to provide information concerning what they actually know about the many aspects of their L2, regardless of language studied and language of origin.

14. Reading and listening, as receptive skills, will help to solidify proper stress placement and general AM use. In this instance, realia from magazines, newspapers and other forms of literature might help to reinforce the material. It appears essential in the L2 classroom that students be exposed to the widest

variety of materials available to restructure and recycle the various language forms, especially crucial at the beginning stages of language learning.

Future research

A longitudinal study of Spanish AMs is needed, including the results from dictées in which students are unfamiliar with the word, as opposed to a situation in which students may be relatively aware of the word's orthographic system. In this vein, a wider scope of writing samples, both structured and unstructured, and in which the writing tasks are varied, need to be accomplished for L2 learners. The ideal testing situation is one in which the writing tasks are varied, need to be accomplished for L2 learners. The ideal testing situation is one in which all four traditional skills are used at once--difficult in any 'natural' sampling because of the time and size constraints in normal classroom. We might also seek to discover the relationship between the type of markedness described here and other orthographic conventions, such as spelling, orthographic variants, etc., not only with Spanish but with other languages taught in the classroom. Thirdly, we might extract additional data by asking students to read larger chunks of data that contain both properly and improperly written language forms. As a consequence, one could study the interplay of standard and non-standard forms. The results of such testing could validate the claim made here that language learners can and do pronounce words according to the standard without expressly using AMs. Finally, one might explore the relationship between Universal Grammar and Second Language Acquisition concerning the written language, extending the

work begun by Clahsen (1990), Flynn (1988), and White (1990). Non-native use might help to determine which principles are determined and which parameters are set for L2. This kind of work might also be extended to other languages that consistently use orthographic conventions. Another area for research and information gathering is to have students read all of their words in compositions, both those that are written in native-like ways and those that are not. The interplay of such forms could then reveal a great deal about the interlanguage system. Still another area is to complete research that discovers the difference between high school and college-level classes, since it is widely believed in the profession that high school and college students do not produce the same level of target-like forms (although this appears to be largely unfounded to date). Above all, language research must be aimed at discovering how students' perceptions of second and foreign languages can help instructors shape and de-mystify that language for the learner.

Endnotes

1. Anecdotally, students often complain about having to learn the word and the accent mark. Teachers often find fodder for error correction (cf. Wieczorek 1991b) in missing accent marks.

2. Wieczorek (1989) showed that accent marks in the preterit (TL forms) appear on just those forms that lack the theme vowel (first and third person).

3. Stress is actually moved in plural formation for only six words in Spanish (cf. Harris 1983:181). The use of the AM in these words reflects such a change.

4. A group of words (homophones) was collected in which there exists no pronunciation difference but rather a change in grammatical category (e.g., que/qué, quien/quién, cuando/cuándo, de/dé, tu/tú, el/él, ese/ése, si/sí). There were seventeen forms collected from this category. In the instances of occurrence, students were asked not only how to pronounce the words but also what they meant. The students all responded with correct usage of the words.

5. Even though the dieresis exists in some select words in English, students are not always aware of this fact.

Appendix I

The following items were taken from student compositions. Lack of number means that only one form was of this word was found. All forms are non-native.

Form	N	Form	N
acampabamos		adios	7
alla		(a) mi	
ano	2	aqui	4
arboles		Argentína	
atéletico		atencion	
atletico		autobus	3
avion		bañabamos	
banarse	2	bano	
barbacóa		beisbol	
besoeria		cafe	
calle		cápitulos	
cápitulo	4	capitúlo	
carcel		castano	
céreal		cesped	2
champu	6	characteristicas	2
characteristicos		chemiqo	
cicatríz		clasica	
combinacion		comicas	
comisaria		composicion	

composicione		composition	
continue		credito	
cuándo (not a question)	2	cuando (a question)	
de (subj. of dar)		deficil	
descripcion		descripciónes	
despues	17	despuese	3
devolvío		dias	2
dia	9	dias	2
direciones		direccion	
directiónes		discripcion	
domesticos	2	dondé	
ejercito		el (pronoun)	
entre (pret)		ese (pronoun)	
espanol	3 (2 speakers)	esquia	
esta	4	estan	2
estas (verb)		estacion	
estomago		examenes	
excursion		exotíco	
faciles		fantastícos	
fisica		fué	
fuí	4	futbol	
Gonzalez (speaker's mother's maiden name)			
graduacíon		graducíon	
gustaria	2	(me) gusto	

hacian		ibamos	
insolacion		invite (pret.)	
inyeccion	2	jabon	
jamon	2	japones	
lapiz		leccion	
lícensía	*double AMs	llege (pret.)	
Lopez		magnificent	
malisimo		mama	
manana	6	maquina	3
Maria	3	mariscoseria	
mas	5	medía	
medico	3	medicos	3
mejorandome		melocontés	
Merida		Mexíco	2
Mexico	3	mí (adj)	2
miercoles		mojónes	
museó		musica	
ní		nacio	
no se		novocaina	
oficina	2	oi	
ojala		ordens	
Pacifico		papa	
peiña		pelicula	5
peliculas	2	pequeno	

			20
pido (should be pidió)		pildoras	2
pina		plantaci (erased AM) on	
policia	2	politico	
porque (question word)		porqué	3
preterito	4	profesion	
proxima		proximo	2
proximos		pisquiatria	
que (question word)	4	queria	
quien (question word)	2	rediculo	
reunion		reuno	
sabado		sabado	4
sabados		sandia	2
séis		seís	
semaforo	4	sesion	
sí (means si)		simpatíca	
simpaticos		sintomas	
solo (adv.)		sotano	
Suarez		subdivision	
sucedio		sueter	
sweater		sufriamos	
tambíen	4	tambien	26
telefono	2	television	2
television	3	tenia	
tipico		titulo	

Tobias (speaker's own name)		tomabamos	2
trafíco	2	tropico	
tu (pron)	5	tú (adj.)	
ultima		ultimita	
ultimo		vacaciónes	
vaccacion		vacia	2
vacio	2	violin	

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